

ProQuest Standards-Based Learning Activity

Identifying Theme in a Story **An English Language Arts Lesson** -- *Teacher Procedures*

APPROPRIATE FOR: Language Arts, Grades 6-8

TIMELINE: One class period

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS ADDRESSED THROUGH THIS LESSON

NCTE: <http://www.ncte.org/standards>

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Reading Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Level III Grade: 6-8

1. Establishes and adjusts purposes for reading (e.g., to understand, interpret, enjoy, solve problems, predict outcomes, answer a specific question, form an opinion, skim for facts; to discover models for own writing)

LEARNING EXPECTATIONS/OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the literary element of *theme*.
- Students will use **ProQuest, eLibrary, SIRS Knowledge Source, or SIRS Discoverer** to read more about literary elements and to learn about how to locate *theme* in a text.
- Students will use text sources found through ProQuest to practice identifying *theme*.
- Students will compile their interpretations about *theme* using a work sheet/graphic organizer.

MATERIALS

- Computer
- Pens and paper for note taking
- Copies of texts identified below
- Copies of handouts identified below

ACTIVITY PROCESS: DIRECTIONS TO THE TEACHER

Description of Activity

Students will research the literary element of "Theme" on ProQuest. In pairs, they will read and discuss two of Aesop's Fables, "The Fox and the Grapes" and "The Wind and the Sun," in order to see examples of literary themes at their most basic. They will read and understand "strategies for identifying theme" below, and apply these to another text, "The Turnip." Upon completing a reading of that text, students will be asked to complete several graphic organizers to help them apply their understanding of how to identify themes in a text.

Background Information/Scenario

Theme is one of the more difficult elements of a story to identify. A theme is a story's message. It is what the author of a piece of text wants you to remember most.

The theme of a fable is its moral. The theme of a parable is its teaching. The theme of a piece of fiction is its view about life and how people behave.

Source: <http://www.learner.org/exhibits/literature/read/theme1.html>

A good place to start when learning how to identify theme is to look at Aesop's Fables. These are short tales that were written long ago for the purpose of teaching little morals, or lessons. Here in these tales, you can identify the theme of the text right away, because the author gives it to you with the tale. Here's an example:

The Ant and the Grasshopper

In a field one summer's day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An Ant passed by bearing along with great toil an ear of corn he was taking to the nest.

"Why not come and chat with me," said the Grasshopper, "instead of toiling and moiling in that way?"

"I am helping to lay up food for the winter," said the Ant, "and recommend you to do the same."

"Why bother about winter?" said the Grasshopper. "We have got plenty of food at present."

But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came the Grasshopper had no food and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew:

It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.

Source: <http://www.knowledgerush.com/books/aesopa10.html>

In this fable, the theme is, "It is best to prepare for the days of necessity."

Outline of Procedures -- Day One

1. Students will research the literary element of "theme" in ProQuest. To find information about theme, type the key words "literary themes" or "analyzing literary themes" and "finding themes in literature" in the ProQuest search box.

Then have students find articles that include a list of suggestions to use when trying to identify theme. After reading this page, have students print it out.

2. Students will read two Aesop's Fables ("The Fox and the Grapes", and "The Wind and the Sun") and identify the obvious themes. Have students compare their ideas about theme in these fables with a partner, to see if any disagreement arises. Ask students to share their thoughts with the teacher if there is disagreement. To read these two fables, use the search page of ProQuest to type in and locate "Aesop's Fables." Click on the title "Aesop's Fables" in the Editor's Choice box. Scroll down the list of Fables until you see the titles "The Fox and the Grapes" and "The Wind and the Sun."

3. Instruct students that as mentioned above, the *theme* of a fictional text may not always be this easy. Readers must be detectives and use clues in the story (a character's actions, setting, plot events and conflict) to discover a theme.

Here are other steps for locating theme in a story:

- Decide what the main topics of the story are. Most middle school stories include topics such as these:
 - Friendship
 - Courage
 - Hope
 - Trust
 - Justice
 - Violence
 - Race-relations
 - Love
 - Freedom
 - Childhood
 - Survival
 - Growing up
 - Family
- Although a story may include several of the topics mentioned above, try to choose the two most important ones.
- Go back to the story and identify which clues you have to support that these are the two main topics. If you have enough clues to support your choice of topics, you can try to figure out the story's theme from the topics.
- Using the two topics and the evidence that you have to support them, decide what important message the author of the text is trying to send. For example, if we are reading a text in which friendship and courage are the main topics, using evidence from the story, a student might guess that "*Friendship* can give you the *courage* to overcome things that you were once too scared to try."

4. Show students the theme work sheet (below). Make sure students understand how the graphic organizer here can help them figure out a text's theme.

5. Have students read "The Turnip" and identify its theme.

http://www.storiestogrowby.com/stories/turnip_russia.html After reading the text, students should complete the theme work sheet. When finished, students should share their theme ideas with a partner. Partners should discuss any differences in their themes. Why do they think there are differences?

6. Have students share findings with the whole class. Discuss possible main topics for the story. Discuss possible themes for the story. Have partners who disagreed explain why there was disagreement.

7. To conclude, have students share back the steps that they took to find the theme of the story. Have students share back their explanation of what theme of a story is.

Conclusion/Finished Work

Teacher collects work sheet for assessment. Class discusses choice of themes for "The Turnip" and reviews steps to identifying theme in a story.

ProQuest Resources Required—*Editor Selected website collections*

Analyzing theme:

<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/literature/read/theme1.html>

Elements of a story -- basic introduction of literary elements even though it excludes theme:

http://www.uwf.edu/coehelp/studentaccounts/gmaxwell/elements_of_a_story.htm

Fairy tale to use -- "The Turnip":

http://www.storiestogrowby.com/stories/turnip_russia.html

Short fiction samples -- high level of reading:

<http://eserver.org/fiction/short.html>

(Editor's Choice Web Link in ProQuest through search for "short stories")

Possible story -- "The Symphony of Friendship." Review to determine which is most age- and reading level-appropriate for your class:

<http://www.mandala.co.jp/B9/P00E.html>

Aesop's Fables

The Fox and the Grapes

One hot summer's day a Fox was strolling through an orchard till he came to a bunch of Grapes just ripening on a vine which had been trained over a lofty branch. "Just the thing to quench my thirst," quoth he. Drawing back a few paces, he took a run and a jump, and just missed the bunch. Turning round again with a One, Two, Three, he jumped up, but with no greater success. Again and again he tried after the tempting morsel, but at last had to give it up, and walked away with his nose in the air, saying: "I am sure they are sour."

It is easy to despise what you cannot get.

The Wind and the Sun

The Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger. Suddenly they saw a traveler coming down the road, and the Sun said: "I see a way to decide our dispute. Whichever of us can cause that traveler to take off his cloak shall be regarded as the stronger. You begin." So the Sun retired behind a cloud, and the Wind began to blow as hard as it could upon the traveler. But the harder he blew the more closely did the traveler wrap his cloak round him, till at last the Wind had to give up in despair. Then the Sun came out and shone in all his glory upon the traveler, who soon found it too hot to walk with his cloak on.

Kindness effects more than severity.

(source: <http://www.knowledgerush.com/books/aesopa10.html>)

The Turnip **by the Grimm Brothers**

There were once two brothers who both served as soldiers, one of them was rich, and the other poor. Then the poor one, to escape from his poverty, doffed his soldier's coat, and turned farmer. He dug and hoed his bit of land, and sowed it with turnip-seed. The seed came up, and one turnip grew there which became large and strong, and visibly grew bigger and bigger, and seemed as if it would never stop growing, so that it might have been called the princess of turnips, for never was such an one seen before, and never will such an one be seen again.

At length it was so enormous that by itself it filled a whole cart, and two oxen were required to draw it, and the farmer had not the least idea what he was to do with the turnip, or whether it would be a fortune to him or a misfortune. At last he thought, "if you sell it, what will you get for it that is of any importance, and if you eat it yourself, why, the small turnips would do you just as much good. It would be better to take it to the king, and make him a present of it."

So he placed it on a cart, harnessed two oxen, took it to the palace, and presented it to the king.

"What strange thing is this," said the king. "Many wonderful things have come before my eyes, but never such a monster as this. From what seed can this have sprung, or are you a favorite of good fortune and have met with it by chance."

"Ah, no", said the farmer, "no favorite am I. I am a poor soldier, who because he could no longer support himself hung his soldier's coat on a nail and took to farming land. I have a brother who is rich and well known to you, lord king, but I, because I have nothing, am forgotten by everyone."

Then the king felt compassion for him, and said, "You shall be raised from your poverty, and shall have such gifts from me that you shall be equal to your rich brother."

Then he bestowed on him much gold, and lands, and meadows, and herds, and made him immensely rich, so that the wealth of the other brother could not be compared with his.

When the rich brother heard what the poor one had gained for himself with one single turnip, he envied him, and thought in every way how he also could come by a similar piece of luck. He set about it in a much more cunning way, however, and took gold and horses and carried them to the king, and made certain the king would give him a much larger present in return. If his brother had got so much for one turnip, what would he not carry away with him in return for such beautiful things as these.

The king accepted his present, and said he had nothing to give him in return that was more rare and excellent than the great turnip. So the rich man was obliged to put his brother's turnip in a cart and have it taken to his home. There, he did not know on whom to vent his rage and anger, until bad thoughts came to him, and he resolved to kill his brother.

He hired murderers, who were to lie in ambush, and then he went to his brother and said, "Dear brother, I know of a hidden treasure, we will dig it up together, and divide it between us."

The other agreed to this, and accompanied him without suspicion. While they were on their way the murderers fell on him, bound him, and would have hanged him to a tree.

But just as they were doing this, loud singing and the sound of a horse's feet were heard in the distance. On this their hearts were filled with terror, and they pushed their prisoner hastily into the sack, hung it on a branch, and took to flight. He, however, worked up there until he had made a hole in the sack through which he could put his head.

The man who was coming by was no other than a traveling student, a young fellow who rode on his way through the wood joyously singing his song. When he who was aloft saw that someone was passing below him, he cried, "Good day. You have come at a lucky moment."

The student looked round on every side, but did not know whence the voice came. At last he said, "Who calls me?"

Then an answer came from the top of the tree, "Raise your eyes, here I sit aloft in the sack of wisdom. In a short time have I learnt great things, compared with this all schools are a jest, in a very short time I shall have learnt everything, and shall descend wiser than all other men. I understand the stars, and the tracks of the winds, the sand of the sea, the healing of illness, and the virtues of all herbs, birds and stones. If you were once within it you would feel what noble things issue forth from the sack of knowledge."

The student, when he heard all this, was astonished, and said, "Blessed be the hour in which I have found you. May not I also enter the sack for a while."

He who was above replied as if unwillingly, "For a short time I will let you get into it, if you reward me and give me good words, but you must wait an hour longer, for one thing remains which I must learn before I do it."

When the student had waited a while he became impatient, and begged to be allowed to get in at once, his thirst for knowledge was so very great.

So he who was above pretended at last to yield, and said, "In order that I may come forth from the house of knowledge you must let it down by the rope, and then you shall enter it."

So the student let the sack down, untied it, and set him free, and then cried, now draw me up at once, and was about to get into the sack.

"Halt," said the other, "that won't do," and took him by the head and put him upside down into the sack, fastened it, and drew the disciple of wisdom up the tree by the rope. Then he swung him in the air and said, "How goes it with you, my dear fellow. Behold, already you feel wisdom coming, and you are gaining valuable experience. Keep perfectly quiet until you become wiser."

Thereupon he mounted the student's horse and rode away, but in an hour's time sent someone to let the student out again.

(source: http://www.fln.vcu.edu/grimm/ruebe_nav.html)

ASSESSMENT

Students should be assessed based on the following:

Following Instructions:

- Did student follow the directions for locating the Aesop's Fables in ProQuest websites?
- Did student complete the work sheet correctly?

Identifying Theme:

- Did student choose two main topics that the story was about?
- Did student find evidence to support these topics?
- Did student figure out a theme from the main topics and the evidence to support them?
- Did student complete the work sheet?

Class Participation:

- Did student read and discuss the Aesop's Fables with a partner?
- Did student share in the discussion at the end of class?
- Is the student able to describe the steps to identify a story's theme if asked?

OPTIONAL EXTENDED ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Have students identify the theme in their independent reading novels.

2. Story writing: Have students use the theme work sheet as a plan for writing assignments. Once students decide on a theme, they can work backwards and be sure to include character actions that support the theme.

3. Identify the theme of a common class text in order to continue in-depth conversation about how to identify theme in a story.

THEME WORK SHEET

Name: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____

Book/Story Title: _____

Directions: Decide which two main topics your book is about. Explain each topic as clearly as you can in the boxes below. Then, in the star, write down what you think the theme of your book is. Explain it as clearly as you can.

Main Topic #1:

Main Topic #2:

Theme: What message or lesson does the author want the readers to take away from the book?

Identifying Theme in a Story

An English Language Arts Lesson

Theme is one of the more difficult elements of a story to identify. A theme is a story's message. It is what the author of a piece of text wants you to remember most.

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It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.

Source: <http://www.knowledgerush.com/books/aesopa10.html>

In this fable, the theme is, "It is best to prepare for the days of necessity."

DURING THIS ACTIVITY...

- You will learn about the literary element of Theme.
- You will use ProQuest to read more about literary elements and to learn about how to locate theme in a text.

- You will use text sources found through ProQuest to practice identifying theme.
- You will compile your interpretations about theme into a Theme Work sheet/graphic organizer.

DAY ONE

1. You will research the literary element *theme* in ProQuest. To find information about *theme*, Students will research the literary element of “theme” in ProQuest. To find information about theme, type the key words “literary themes” or “analyzing literary themes” and “finding themes in literature” in the ProQuest search box.

Then have students find articles that include a list of suggestions to use when trying to identify theme. After reading this page, have students print it out.

2. Read two Aesop’s Fables (“The Fox and the Grapes”, and “The Wind and the Sun”) and identify the obvious theme. Compare your ideas about theme in these fables with a partner, to see if any disagreement arises. Share your thoughts with the teacher if there is disagreement.

To read these two fables, use the search page of ProQuest to type in and locate “Aesop’s Fables”. Click on the title “Aesop’s Fables” in the Editor’s Choice box. Scroll down the list of Fables until you see the titles, “The Fox and the Grapes”, and “The Wind and the Sun.”

3. Remember, theme of a fictional text may not always be this easy. Readers must be detectives and use clues in the story (like a character’s actions, setting, plot events and conflict) to discover a theme.

Here are other steps for locating theme in a story:

- Decide what the main topics of the story are. Most middle school stories include topics such as these:
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 - Courage
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- Although a story may include several of the topics mentioned above, try to choose the two most important ones.

- Go back to the story and identify which clues you have that these are the two main topics. If you have enough clues to support your choice of topics, you can try to figure out the story's theme from the topics.
- Using the two topics and the evidence that you have to support them, decide what important message the author of the text is trying to send. For example, if you are reading a text in which friendship and courage are the main topics, using evidence from the story I might guess that "Friendship can give you the courage to overcome things that you were once too scared to try."

4. Read the Theme work sheet. You will go over the work sheet with your class. Make sure you understand how the graphic organizer here can help you figure out a text's theme.

5. Read "The Turnip" and identify its theme. To locate the text of "The Turnip," use this ProQuest editor selected website:

http://www.storiestogrowby.com/stories/turnip_russia.html

After reading the text, you should complete the "identifying a story's main topics and theme" work sheet. When finished, you should share your theme with a partner. Partners should discuss any differences in your themes. Why might there be differences?

6. Share your findings with the whole class. Discuss possible main topics for the story. Discuss possible themes for the story.

7. To conclude, be sure you can share back the steps that you took to find the theme of the story. Share back your explanation of what theme of a story is.

ASSESSMENT

You will be assessed for your work in this lesson based on the following:

Following instructions:

- Did you follow the directions for locating the Aesop's Fables in ProQuest?
- Did you complete the work sheet correctly?

Identifying Theme:

- Did you choose two main topics that the story was about?
- Did you find evidence to support these topics?
- Did you figure out a theme from the main topics and the evidence to support them?
- Did you complete the work sheet?

Class Participation:

- Did you read and discuss the Aesop's Fables with a partner?
- Did you share in the class discussion at the end of class?

- Are you able to describe the steps to identify a story's theme if asked?